DRAWING ON POP CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA IN ADULT EDUCATION PRACTICE IN TEACHING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the critical media literacy literature and related adult education literature to consider how to draw on popular culture and entertainment media in adult education settings when dealing with diversity and equity issues of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. It also provides some examples of from practice.

Popular culture and fictional entertainment media have an enormous influence on society. Whether in the genre of television sitcom or drama, or fictional stories in popular film, the entertainment media teach us something about ourselves as we map new meaning onto our own experience based on what we see and relate to; for good or for ill, it also teaches us a lot about others through fictional means.

In the past few years, there has been a growing discussion about the role of pop culture and the entertainment media in education (Giroux, 1997; hooks, 1994; Yosso, 2002); In these discussions, critical media education scholars note the tendency of the media to reproduce structural power relations based on race, gender, class, and sexual orientation; however, they also argue that some media challenge such power relations in their portrayals of characters. Thus, given that students are consumers of entertainment media, which serves as a significant way that people construct knowledge about their own and others' identities and thus a significant source of "education", they argue that it is important to teach critical media literacy skills—of how to deconstruct and analyze entertainment media through direct discussion of it in the classroom. Thus far most of these discussions and studies related to critical media literacy have focused on youth. Aside from general reference to the significance of popular culture to the media in our lives (Miller, 1999), discussion of the role of entertainment media in the education of adults has been absent. But given that adult learners and educators are also large consumers of media, it is also important that adult educators tend to issues related to media literacy, particularly in attempting to attend to diversity and equity issues. Therefore the purpose of this paper is two-fold: to provide an overview of the critical media literacy to consider how to draw on popular culture and entertainment media in adult education settings to teach critical medial literacy skills and to discuss issues of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation; and to explore how entertainment media can be used in teaching practice.

Related Literature

The fact that there has been so little discussion on the role of popular culture and entertainment media in adult education is surprising, since there has been much discussion and study in the field of tacit knowledge and nonformal learning, and what people know through life experience (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). There has also been a consideration of "other ways of knowing" through image , symbol, spirituality, and body awareness (Clark, 2002; Dirkx, 2002, Tisdell, 2003); and much discussion of teaching for cultural relevance based on learners group based identities and about challenging power relations based on gender, race, and class (Guy, 1999; Hayes & Colin, 1994; Sheared & Sissel, 2001). Furthermore, in the world of media studies, there have been a number of studies that focus on how adults construct their identities in light of popular culture, though these studies don't specifically focus on learning or education (e.g. Hall,

2001; Shim, 1998; Radway, 1984). Because adult learners are large consumers of entertainment media, critical media studies and critical media literacy have a role to play in adult teaching and learning. It is especially relevant in teaching about diversity and equity issues.

The Media's Role in Reproducing or Resisting the Dominant Culture

When considering the media in general, as Giroux (1997) notes, most often the media reinforce the images and values of the dominant culture. For example, most entertainment media feature characters that represent fairly traditional norms and values. Main characters are most often white; if they are adults, they are most often married (or clearly hoping-to-be married), middle to upper-middle class, and heterosexual, often in traditional and/or stereotypical gender roles, and race and class roles as well. But entertainment media can also challenge traditional norms, in (non-stereotypical) portrayals of characters of specific cultural groups of those who either do not represent the dominant culture, or who do not ascribe to its values (Dolby, 2003). Some entertainment media overtly or covertly, through both comedy and drama, deal with current social issues that focus on race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, and in some ways challenge the dominant culture, and in other ways reproduces in. For example, many recent entertainment media have overtly dealt with race/ethnic relations (e.g. Boston Public, ER, Eddie Mac); interracial romantic relationships (Sex and the City, Six Feet Under, ER); the lives and relationships of single women who aren't necessarily looking specifically to be married, thus challenging the notion of "happy" women as married (Sex and the City; Girlfriends). However, these same shows might reinforce the dominant culture's notion of class or other relations. Further, many shows now feature main characters who are openly gay or lesbian (Will and Grace; The L Word, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy; Six Feet Under), which brings to voice the traditional silence about sexual orientation, and challenges the notion that to be gay or lesbian is to be deviant, sad, and miserable, though some characters are portrayed in somewhat stereotypical ways.

Sometimes fictional characters take on national significance, and even become part of public debate on social issues. Who could forget Dan Quayle's early 1990s criticism of the single motherhood of the lead character of Murphy Brown (as if she were a real person and not a fictional character) in arguing his "family values" agenda? Or the stir of the later 1990s caused by the coming out of the lead character of the fictional show, Ellen played by Ellen DeGeneres,? Indeed, many of these fictional characters in entertainment media have an impact on our individual and our national psyche. They are fictional, yet they become real in our own individual and collective experience of them, a blurring of the real and unreal that media scholar, Arthur Berger (1998) calls the "postmodern presence," referring to the presence of these fictional characters in our lives, and of what they stand for in relation to our constructions of identity. Indeed, the entertainment media has a role in shaping our consciousness about current social issues, and our beliefs about groups both similar to and very different from us based on multiple aspects of their/our identities of race, class, gender, marital status, and sexual orientation. The media can reinforce cultural or gender stereotypes, or it can challenge them. In short, the entertainment media, for good or for ill, is one of the most powerful vehicles of nonformal education of postmodern life. It is important for educators to consider its role in shaping our learning and education, particularly as we attempt to deal with diversity and equity issues and a very diverse student population. The field of adult education has something to learn from the wider critical media studies in education field in this regard.

Critical Media Studies in Education

The growing interest in the topic of critical media studies, as indicated by the fact that a recent issue of the Harvard Educational Review (Fall, 2003) was devoted to the role of popular culture in education. As Dolby (2003) observes in pulling together current discussion on media studies and education, there are indeed those who are quite strident in their critique of popular culture from both conservative and liberal/radical perspectives Many conservatives hold the media partially responsible for anything from sexual promiscuity, to violence, to drug use among youth. Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001) note that many liberals and leftists argue that the media serves the interests of the dominant culture, and tends to reproduce gender, race, and class relations. While virtually all critical medial literacy and critical education scholars would see the tendency of the media to reproduce structural power relations based on race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, they also argue that some media challenge such power relations. Further, they argue it is important not only to be aware of or to study pop culture, as it is unrealistic to expect people not to be consumers of popular culture, for as Grossberg (1989) observes, popular culture and entertainment media are a source of pleasure. Rather, it is important to teach critical media literacy—to teach how to deconstruct and analyze entertainment media, , particularly around portrayals of characters based on social structures of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation (Dolby, 2003; Holtzman, 2000; hooks, 1994, 1989; Yosso, 2002).

There have been a number of conceptual discussions about the role of entertainment media and popular culture in education and some research studies on its role in shaping consciousness about gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. Thus far, most of these discussions and studies are focused on youth as consumers of popular culture and/or how adolescents of different cultural groups draw on popular culture in constructing their own and others' identities (e.g.. Dolby, 2003, Luke, 1999; McCarthy et al, 2003; Morrell, 2002; Tavin, 2003). There have been a few studies about how traditional-age college students construct meaning and the identities of themselves and others in light of visual images and entertainment media, including Pauley's (2003) study of pre-service elementary teachers, and Yosso's (2002) study of Latino community college students. Currently, there appear o be no research studies of critical media literacy or the use of drawing on entertainment media as a teaching tool specifically in adult education; this needs to be the topic of further research. Nevertheless, at this juncture, insights from some of these research studies can be applied to adult education practice.

Developing Critical Media Literacy in Adult Education Practice

While there is currently a lack of data based research on the topic, it is clear that many adult educators actually do draw on some media in practice. Clearly, many have used the film, Educating Rita, over the years to begin to develop in students an understanding of the complexity of what adult learners face in returning higher education. Many have also referenced several popular culture films to examine different models of teaching, films such as Dead Poets Society, Dangerous Minds, Mr. Holland's Opus, Mona Lisa Smile, To Sir with Love, to name a few, though these films do not deal with adult learners. However, simply drawing on the media, is not necessarily developing critical media literacy. Critical media literacy is about getting students to examine how various characters and subjects are portrayed — to get them to examine how and in what ways different media challenge and/or reinforce the dominant culture, so that they can examine the messages that they, and all viewers, may be receiving through the media about gender, race, class, and cultural relations.

There are numerous ways one can do this. One is by spontaneously examining media images in classes as they are used. For example, in working with graduate students in adult education, I always have students do collaborative presentations. One recent group of students did a

presentation on Dan Pratt's (1998) book, Five Perspectives on Teaching in Adult and Higher Education and used scenes from different movies to portray these different perspectives of teaching or mentoring. Though it was unintentional on their part, the group chose only scenes where those featured in the teaching roles were men. They did an excellent presentation overall. But in trying to always teach to challenge power relations in the way Freire suggests, in teaching a critical reading of the word and the world, after their presentation was over, I asked the group what else they noticed about these films. Eventually, they recognized that it was all men in the teaching roles portrayed, though they initially weren't conscious of it. But the fact that it was only men that were portrayed is somewhat reflective of the fact that in the media that features teaching adolescents or college students, it is most often (though certainly not exclusively) men featured in such roles. However, the group that chose these particular scenes happened to be three men; thus, we also discussed the fact that it may have been that they chose these, simply because they related to them more in light of who they are.

Certainly, those who are interested in dealing with diversity and equity issues can draw on what spontaneously happens in the learning environment or in the larger world to begin to develop critical media literacy. But clearly, it is possible to build critical media literacy activities in all classes somewhat more proactively. Tara Yosso's (2002) action research study of Latino community college students, not only offers some direction for researchers, it also offers suggestions for practice in this regard. In teaching critical media literacy, Yosso (2002) notes that critical media studies scholars generally make the following assumptions about entertainment media: a) the media are controlled and driven by money; b) media images are constructions—both of directors, actors, and other media makers; c) media makers bring their own experience with them in their construction of characters, including their perceptions of race, gender, class, etc.; d) consumers of media construct their own meaning of media portrayals in light of their own background experience; e) unlike print media, entertainment media such as movies and television, are a combination of moving visuals, sounds, and words that combine in facilitating meaning; f) it is possible to acquire multiple literacies in becoming media literate. Thus, critical media education scholars are essentially coming from a social constructionist perspective in analyzing entertainment media, in the belief that viewers are constructing further meaning in light of their past experience and beliefs, in dialogue with what the images and sounds they see and hear on the screen. Of course, such meanings and identities are shaped in part by the power relations of gender, race, class, sexual orientation that inform all of society

In my own "Historical and Social Issues in Adult Education", I typically introduce some of the assumptions of critical media literacy scholars, as summarized by Yosso, so that students can be exposed to the ideas about critical media literacy. Then I ask students to go off and see a current movie, or a pop culture TV show, and analyze it for what they see as the messages about race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ableness, etc. that are portrayed there. They can choose any movie or show they want— one they feel either challenges the dominant culture around certain issues, or they think reinforces it. They can work collaboratively or alone, but we always spend time discussing these pop cultural movies and TV shows. The class members certainly don't always agree with one another or with me on interpretations of characters. But that's partly the point: .as Yosso (2002) suggests in one of her assumptions, consumers of media construct their own meaning of media portrayals in light of their own background experience, just as media makers do. Furthermore, in considering even those shows that tend to challenge the dominant culture in one way, such as Sex in the City or Will and Grace, we find and discuss the fact that they reinforce it in many other ways. Sometimes we watch clips of particular movies or shows, and write down what we see individually, and then discuss it as a group. We might brainstorm about different ways of portraying characters. Indeed, this is only scratching the surface about how to include critical media literacy in adult education. But over

the past eight years since I have been doing this work, students continually tell me that this is one of the most effective tools to help them see the world in new ways.

Conclusion

There is an important place for critical media literacy in adult education, since adults are as much consumers of entertainment media as are youth, though thus far the critical media literacy research and discussion has focused on youth. The entertainment media affects how all of us learn about gender, race, class, sexual orientation, both as passive consumers, and as active meaning makers. Engage in active viewing and discussion and deconstruction of character portrayals is clearly a way of raising consciousness not only about .the “pedagogy of pop culture” but also about gender, race, class, culture, and sexual orientation issues in the world. Given that this is being discussed in other venues in education, and the media is a significant vehicle of education or mis-education, it is time that we as adult educators consider the relevance of critical media literacy to our own work

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